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ABSTRACT

The author supports the assumption that the role of the teacher of gifted children differs in some substantive way from the role of the teacher in general. Specific teacher traits, knowledges, techniques, methods, and materials which are unique to effective teaching of the gifted are explored. (Author/SBH)

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WHO SHOULD TEACH THE GIFTED

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ABSTRACT

Implicit in the consideration of the role of the teacher of the gifted children is the assumption that this role differs in some substantive way from the role of the teacher in general.

Are there specific traits which characterize the successful teacher of the gifted? Are there knowledges, techniques, methods and materials which are unique to effective teaching of the gifted?

With the employment of trained teachers of the gifted, research will receive fresh impetus and new direction which will lead to identification of qualified and able teaching personnel allowing us to meet the tremendous challenge in educating the gifted.

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Implicit in the consideration of the role of the teacher of gifted children is the assumption that this role differs in some substantive way from the role of the teacher in general. Are there specific traits which characterize the successful teacher of the gifted? Does the role require deviances in intellectual aptitude and creativity similar to gifted children themselves? Are there knowledges, understandings, methods, techniques, and materials which are unique to effective teaching of the gifted?

There has been little research indicating characteristics that identify successful teachers of the gifted. Indeed, there is little research to indicate those traits which differentiate between good and poor teachers in general.

There seems to be a trend to employ teaching personnel whose primary responsibility is to work with gifted children. With the employment of more special teachers of the gifted, there will be more opportunity to study their unique characteristics. (Gallagher, 1975).

Public Law 94-142 has expanded the scope and purpose of the Education of the Handicapped Act which includes the education of the gifted. In a recent evaluation of this expanded scope and purpose (Irvin, 1976) indicates a recent, if mild interest in one of the keys to the problem of adequate education for the gifted. This is in the person of the teacher.

In 1976, Irvin found both the lay public and professional educators generally agree that the adequacy of an education is determined to a large extent by the teacher. The identification of qualified and able teaching personnel, therefore, constitutes one of the most important of all educational concerns. Obtaining capable teachers is an intrinsic interest and obligation of education.

BECOMING A TEACHER OF THE GIFTED

According to Torrance (1971) the process of becoming a teacher of gifted children is much like the process of creative thinking itself. If you are counting upon your college education, your courses in education, or your student teaching to "make" you a teacher of the gifted, you will be disappointed. You might learn much about the subjects you will be teaching, the nature of children, the learning process, the methods and materials of instruction, but this is not enough. All of these things are inadequate. They must be combined with your own potentialities and the needs of your own pupils in such a way as to become your own unique invention, your way of teaching. This unique invention of the teacher is tremendously important in the teaching of gifted children to help them discover and become their potentialities.

The teacher's invention emerges through the creative process of trying to accomplish some goal. As you fail or succeed in your teaching goals, you become aware of your deficiencies, defects in your techniques and strategies, and gaps in your knowledge. You draw upon your past experiences and increase your search for clues in your ongoing experiences.

You try to apply creatively the scientifically developed principles learned in your professional education or through your reading. Then you read and study and puzzle some more. You see things of which you have hitherto been unaware. You make guesses, or formulate hypotheses concerning the solution. You test and modify these hypotheses and tell others what you have discovered. Through the pain and ecstasy that accompany this process, your personal invention occurs!

Since your way of teaching must be your own invention, no one can present you with a prescription for reaching the conditions most favorable for the release of creativity. Your own personality resources and needs, your intellectual resources and skills, the needs and abilities your pupils display, and the expectations of the community in which you are teaching all interact to determine the most effective methods and materials. However, previous studies discussed in this paper make it clear that the way the teacher proceeds is more important than the materials or the specific methods utilized.

Torrance (1971) concludes that perhaps the most important word of counsel for the teacher of the gifted is that old truism, "Be yourself if you want to contribute anything original and worthwhile."

Teacher self-evaluation is almost unanimously recommended by teacher organizations and professional experts on teacher improvement. Simpson (1969) points out that regardless of the extent of disagreement on other characteristics of good teachers there is almost universal consensus that self-improvement based on self-evaluation is both desirable and crucial.

Some important improvements in education may demand significant institutional changes. However, there are a multitude of points at which the individual teacher can improve without significant institutional changes. These points are discussed by Witty (1971).

. Do you possess an understanding of self?

The learning of children is influenced not only by what teachers do but also by what they are. In dealing with students the good teacher is constantly evaluating his own feelings, perceptions, motivations and abilities.

Even the decision to work with gifted children should be based on the teacher's awareness of his own strengths and limitations. Gifted children progress most satisfactorily under teachers of superior intelligence who have a broad, general knowledge as well as a thorough mastery of subject area.

. Do you possess understanding of giftedness?

French (1966) noted that the label exceptional is commonly applied to children who differ notably from the average. Among them the outstandingly bright ones are referred to as gifted children. Those who possess outstanding aptitudes in music, the arts, mechanics and other areas are usually referred to as talented.

Children with IQ's of 120 or 125 or above are described as superior. They represent 5 to 10 percent of the population. Among the superior ones are gifted, with IQ's of 135 or 140 and above; and the extremely gifted, with IQ's of 170 or 180 or above. The gifted group constitutes approximately 1 to 3 percent of the total population.

. Are you a facilitator of learning rather than a director of learning?

The gifted child - with his heightened curiosity, wide range of interests and insight into problems - is particularly thwarted by rigid curriculum requirements. The following suggestions by Witty (1971), while appropriate for all children, are vital to the enhancement of lifelong learning habits for gifted children.

- Build learning experiences around the child's natural curiosity by dealing with problems relevant to his own needs, purposes, and interests.
- Allow the student to engage in the organization and planning of learning activities.
- Provide real-life experiences that call for the active participation of the child, and then stress the skills necessary for the participation.
- Act as a resource for learning rather than as a dispenser of information; resist the temptation to impose knowledge upon a child before he is ready for it.
- Keep programs flexible enough to encourage exploration and inventiveness.
- Encourage and reward initiative, inquisitiveness, originality, and a questioning attitude.
- Allow a child to make his own mistakes and to accept the consequences (as long as the consequences are not dangerous).

One may wonder about the difference between direction and facilitation of learning. The director imposes assignments, set requirements, and evaluates outcomes; the facilitator supports the students' self initiated learning and self-determined goals and provides feedback for self-evaluation.

. Do you provide challenge rather than pressure?

Because of the initiative and perseverance, the gifted child is particularly receptive to a challenging situation. The teacher's wise use of questions that ask not only what and when, but why, how, for what reason, with what intent, and to what purpose aids in challenging a bright student to the kind of thinking that provides the building blocks for speculative theory and philosophy.

. Are you as concerned with the process of learning as with the product?

Educational progress is measured largely through the use of standardized achievement tests which emphasize the acquisition of skills and the memorizatinn of facts. This narrow view of learning is highly undersirable since the abilities involved in recall and applicatinn of learning facts are low in the hierarchy of intellectual processes. Much more important to the individual in lifelong learning are the thought processes such as comprehending, analyzing, synthesizing, organizing and evaluating.

. Do you provide feedback rather than judgment?

Gifted students are ready for self-assessment and self-evaluation from the time they enter school. It is the job of the teacher to provide feedback information and a behavior model, but the seat of evaluation should be within the child. He should be encouraged to evaluate his own work not in terms of grades and norms but in terms of his own needs, purposes, and goals.

. Do you provide alternate learning strategies?

One of the most important things a child can learn is that usually there is more than one way to accomplish an objective or attain a goal. There may be several solutions to a problem, several ways of categorizing objects or several points of view in a discussion.

For a gifted child who is less creative, alternative learning strategies should be pointed out and demonstrated by the teacher. Creativity is fostered in an atmosphere which provides freedom to experiment.

. Do you provide a classroom climate which promotes self-esteem and offers safety for creative and cognitive risk-taking?

Teachers can create a classroom atmosphere in which each child has a sense of belonging, a feeling of self-worth and a sense of value in his own individuality. How is such an atmosphere created?

Suggestions by Witty (1971) follow:

- The teacher is supportive and accepting.
- Coersion is not used to manipulate children (i.e., threats about grades, loss of approval, loss of prestige or banishment.)
- The teacher recognizes, accepts and values individual differences.
- The teacher provides differentiated learning experiences.
- Each child shares in planning his own work and the work of the group.
- The teacher provides enough structure for the child to feel secure but not enough to limit or stifle creative responses.
- The teacher accepts and empathizes with strong feelings.
- The teacher recognizes his own limitations.
- The teacher values creativity and welcomes new ideas.

Gifted and creative children are willing to take risks in a warm, supportive climate. They will risk the exploration of a new field; they will experiment with different learning techniques; they will share cherished ideas; they will define difficult problems; they will reveal their feelings; they will make mistakes and discover that they can learn from their mistakes; and finally, they will not fear to be themselves.

TEACHING THE TEACHER OF THE GIFTED: A TRAINING MODEL

A recent survey of 239 experts in education of the gifted (Gallagher,1975) strongly advocated specialized teacher preparation, continued professional study and frequent contacts with other teachers of the gifted. These experts recommend subsidies for training, university training centers, and in-service preparation for those already in the profession.

The survey further indicates that if biological breakthroughs should produce a marked increase in the number of gifted children, by the year 2,000 we would not even have trained enough teacher trainers (let alone teachers) to cope with the educational problems created.

The problem of training teachers for work with the gifted (Isaccs, 1971) has not been faced on many university campuses. More state support and federal legislation will probably be necessary to increase emphasis in this area.

The University of South Florida (Tampa), U. S. A., has evoked a program in teacher training for teachers of the gifted in which teaching is seen as the process of continuing learning at its highest level, that of a teacher sharing learning with others - the students. (Sisk, 1974).

The Tampa Model views education for the prospective teachers of the gifted as a unique experience including four major areas; the professional, the specialization, the liberal arts and the field work.

The four areas concentrate on what Carl Rogers (1969) views as the goal of education, that of the facilitation of change and learning. Particularly in the specialization and field work experiences there is an attempt to build what Rogers calls a community of learners - freeing curiosity and permitting individuals to pursue new directions directed by individual interests. Learning, utilizing Rogers' direction is free, self-initiated and spontaneous in an atmosphere of support.

The Tampa Model began as a federal teacher training grant Title V-C in 1966-68, was renewed in 1968-70 and considerably modified under E.P.D.A. 1969-70.

The program graduates approximately ten masters students each year and one doctoral student.

RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Retrospect - Who Should Teach the Gifted

The wheels have been set in motion and there is no turning back. The forward thrusts will gather momentum and the next few years will see not only special educational opportunities for the gifted and talented provided everywhere in the country but also the beneficial effects on different segments of the school population who will be educated in productive ways. (Armfield, 1975).

Armfield (1975) further projects that in effectively meeting the challenge of our times we need people who are not only extremely bright but have capabilities of adapting themselves to the dynamics of ever changing circumstance.

With the establishment of closer working relations among several national and world organizations which led us to this, our 1st World Congress for Future Special Education, we have met the challenge of the past and we are providing quality education for the gifted and talented.

Prospect - You Should Teach the Gifted

Callahan (1978) states that "futurism" is a recently coined word that has become a discipline unto itself. The time span that is of concern to the futurist is between one year from now and fifty years from now. Anything less than one year would probably occur anyway, and more than 50 years is extremely long range and too far away to be of concern. We must avoid seeing tomorrow as merely an improved plan of the present or considering a good future as merely the present with its problems solved.

Shane (cited by Callahan, 1978) projects the need for people who put forward imagination or creative approaches; are able to examine past assumptions regarding schooling and keep an open mind regarding new life styles.

Callahan (citing several people, 1978) projects new challenges to the present and future teachers of the gifted and talented as well as to teachers all over the world: 1) accept a zero reject model, with programming becoming more 'individualized' and geared to the individual's pattern, rhythm, and speed of learning; 2) reflect a stress on humanism, cultural and ethnic sensitivity, and interpersonal relationships in the curriculum; 3) utilize the problem solving approach more widely, at the same time emphasizing the 'learning to learn' construct; 4) become accountable through the greater involvement of consumers and purveyors in the decision making process; 5) develop the need for a new type of educational leader who is tuned into community needs.

With the continued close working relations among the national and world organizations, we will be led to a 2nd World Congress for Future Special Education, we will meet the challenge of the future and we will continue to provide quality education for the gifted and talented.

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